DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 315 770 CS 212 203

AUTHOR Bridges, Phyllis
TITLE Katherine Anne Porter on Her Contemporaries.
PUB DATE Jun 89
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Women's Studies Association (Towson, MD, June 14-18, 1989).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Authors; Biographies; Feminism; *Literary Criticism; Literary History; Role Perception; Self Expression; *Twentieth Century Literature; *United States Literature
IDENTIFIERS Feminist Criticism; *Porter (Katherine Anne)

ABSTRACT

Personal experiences with and critical judgments of leading artists and intellectuals of the twentieth century are recorded in Katherine Anne Porter's essays, letters and conversations which provide snapshots of her attitudes and encounters. Porter's commentaries about such contemporaries as Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Saul Bellow, Flannery O'Connor, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, Eudora Welty, Norman Mailer, and Betty Friedan communicate her own values, biases, perspectives; and sometimes betray her own egotism, insecurity, or even duplicity. Especially noteworthy are the anti-feminist sentiments expressed by Porter which seem inconsistent with her actions and struggles during a long, arduous literary career. Her public rejection of the movement to assure women's rights seems a contradiction for a woman whose experiences had surely taught her the realities of inequities. Still, these attitudes reflect another of the enigmas of Katherine Anne Porter, a woman who on the personal level aided the careers of other women, a woman whose fierce independence carried her through the rugged ups and downs of eighty years of this century, and an artist whose works show the roles of women to be meaningful, even heroic. (KEH)

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Katherine Anne Porter on Her Contemporaries

by Phyllis Bridges
Professor of English
Texas Woman's University

Katherine Anne Porter's ninety years of life were crowded with incident. As a young woman in the 1930's she lived in Germany and met Hitler. As the grande dame of American literature in the 1960's, she dined at the White House as the guest of President Kennedy and later President Johnson. She was a sophisticated, cosmopolitan, highly complex woman, a consummate artist. In one of her essays, Porter wrote, "a vivid personal career of fabulous ups and downs, hardships and strokes of luck, travels in far countries, spiritual and intellectual exile, defensive flight, homesick return with a determined groping for native roots, and a confusion of contradictory jobs have long been the mere conventions of an American author's life" (Collected Essays 284). This description of the American artist's life comes close to matching the existence of Katherine Anne Porter herself.

Born in Texas, Porter lived on both the West Coast, where she was a script writer in Hollywood and a teacher at Stanford, and the East Coast, which was her home in the last years of her life. She chose the University of Maryland as the repository of her papers, furnishings, and memorabilia; and the Katherine Anne Porter Room on that campus memorializes her life as an artist.

Katherine Anne Porter was a woman of keen insight and

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clear opinions. The odyssey of her life took her from Texas to Illinois to Colorado to New York to Mexico to Bermuda to Germany to France to Pennsylvania to Louisiana to California to New York again to Michigan to Conneticut to Maryland where she died and finally back to Texas where she is buried beside her mother at Indian Creek. Her movement through many locales over seventy years of the twentieth century brought her into contact with most of the luminaries of her time. Her commentaries on many of her contemporaries have been recorded in her writings, letters, and conversations. The commentaries tell us about both Porter and her contemporaries. By conveying her opinions and critical judgments, Porter was confessing her own values, biases, perspectives; and sometimes she was betraying her own egotism, insecurity, or even duplicity when she wrote about others. Her friend Allen Tate wrote of Porter:

> She has few of the ordinary human satisfactions--she can't live in the world, she can't have a deep emotional relationship with anybody, she is always moving: in fact, she is trapped in a cycle of romantic emotions that repeat themselves about every five years. I have watched her through three marriages and divorces, and the pattern in all three is identical. When the human personality suffers repeated failures in a fundamental objective experience, it recoils into self-worship, or at best a refined egoism. (Givner, Life 383)

Her difficult personal life aside and her obvious vanity admitted, still Katherine Anne Porter from her acquaintance with the leading artists and intellectuals of the twentieth

century and from her observations gives us fascinating vignettes and opinions.

Her personal experiences with and critical judgments of such contemporaries as Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, D.H. Lawrence, Gertrude Stein, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Virginia Woolf, Betty Friedan, among others, are recorded in her essays, letters, and conversations and provide us with snapshots of her attitudes and encounters.

Katherine Anne Porter met Ernest Hemingway only one time when she was in Paris at Sylvia Beach's bookstore. When Hemingway came in, Sylvia Beach introduced the two writers with the statement that she wanted the two best modern American writers to know one another. Porter described the meeting:

> Hemingway and I stood and gazed unwinkingly at each other with poker faces for all of ten seconds, in silence. Hemingway then turned in one wide swing and hurled himself out of it, and that was all, I am sorry if you are disappointed. All personal lack of sympathy and attraction aside, and they were real in us, it must have been galling to this most famous young man to have his name pronounced in the same breath as writer with someone he had never heard of, and a woman at that. I nearly felt sorry for him.
> (Givner, Life 286)

Porter and William Faulkner were both in the American delegation of six writers to the International Exposition of the Arts to Paris in 1952. Porter, the only woman in the delegation, had the honor of speaking for the American group. Although

Faulkner and Porter obviously had opportunities to socialize during the festival, they avoided each other. Porter always had a low opinion of Faulkner, and he was frequently a target of her criticism. In her lectures, she attacked and discounted the value of Faulkner's work; and she was said to have been distraught when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Of Faulkner's novel Sanctuary, Porter wrote, "I wouldn't have dared to be seen reading Sanctuary in public anywhere. I think it is a truly scandalous book, scandal in a way that the cheap sensationalists who don't pretend to offer anything else cannot really be." Porter's opinion of Faulkner's characters in The Sound and the Fury is similar: "Candace is a horror (she is the only kind that interests Faulkner--the only thing his women usually lack is the opportunity). When Faulkner gets a good chance, he turns out a Candace. She is no good from the beginning, neither is Quentin."

About literary critic and Faulkner scholar Malcolm Cowley, Porter wrote, "Poor Malcolm Cowley was never anything but cold oatmeal from the neck up, and even warmed with likker it is still oatmeal. I wouldn't trust him for even the simplest insight or memory of anything" (Givner, Life 255) This statement was written after the long friendship of Porter and Cowley ended with a falling out.

Hemingway and Faulkner were not the only Nobel laureates to provoke Porter's ire. Of Saul Bellow, Porter wrote:

> Bellow is an awful writer--all that pity, pity, pity me--ugh! I remember when an excerpt from one of his early novels was published in a literary review. I asked the

> editor why he took that terrible thing and he said he didn't like it either but it was the coming thing, and he was right. Pity and smut, like Mailer. He writes like a smutty, little boy; I can't read him."

Katherine Anne Porter was never afraid to take on the literary heavyweights of her time, nor was she reluctant to take the counter position in a literary debate. Her commentary on D. H. Lawrence in her essay "A Wreath for the Gamekeeper," published in 1960, does not follow the tendency of the time to champion Lawrence's work as a triumph over censorship. Instead, Porter assailed Lawrence:

> I wish only to say that I think that from start to finish he was about as wrong as can be on the whole subject of sex, and that he wrote a very laboriously bad book to prove it.

She goes on to say,

> I would not object, then, to D. H. Lawrence's obscenity, if it were really that. I object to his misuse and perversions of obscenity, his wrong-headed denial of its true nature and meaning. Instead of writing straight, healthy obscenity, he makes it sickly sentimental, embarrassingly so, and I find that obscene sentimentality is as hard to bear as any other kind. I object to this pious attempt to purify and canonize obscenity, to castrate the Roaring Boy, to take the low comedy out of sex. We cannot and should not try to hallow these words because they are not hallowed and were never meant to be. The attempt to make pure, tender, sensitive, washed-in-the-blood-of-the-lamb words out of words whose whole intention, function, place in our language is meant to be exactly the opposite is sentimentality, and of a very low order. Our language is rich and full and I daresay there is a word to express every shade of meaning and feeling a human being is capable of, if we are not too lazy to look for it; or if we do not substitute one word for another, such as calling a nasty word--meant to be nasty, we need it that way--"pure," and a pure word "nasty." This is an unpardonable tampering with definitions, and in Lawrence, I think it comes of a very deep grained fear and distrust of sex itself; he was never easy on that subject, could not come to terms with it for anything.
> (Collected Essays 20-21)

Perhaps Porter's most controversial attack in literary criticism was the one she made on Gertrude Stein. Porter and Stein had met through an introduction by Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon in Paris. Recalling the tenor of the meeting in a letter, Porter wrote, "Miss Stein and Miss Toklas both were perfectly friendly and courteous, no incident of any kind marked the visit; and my deep feeling of boredom and futility and sense of suffocation came from the atmosphere itself." Later when Porter read Stein's work and considered her place in twentieth century literature in her essay "The Wooden Umbrella," she described the confusion and egotism of Stein's style: "for once, form, matter and style stuttering and stammering and wallowing along together with the agitated harmony of roiling entrails."

Of Stein's influence on other writers, Katherine Anne Porter wrote:

> Serious young men who were having a hard time learning to write realized with relief that there was nothing at all to it if you just relaxed and put down the first thing that came into your head. She gave them a romantic name, the Lost Generation, and remarkable number of them tried earnestly if unsuccessfully to live up to it. A few of them were really lost, and disappeared, but others has just painted themselves into a very crowded corner. She laid a cooling hand upon their agitated brows and asked with variations, What did it matter? There were only a few geniuses, after all, among which she was one, only the things a genius said made any difference, the rest was "just there," and so she disposed of all the dark questions of life, art, human relations, and death, even eternity, even God, with perfect Stein logic, bringing the scene again into its proper focus, upon herself. (Collected Essays 258)

The personal and hostile tone of Porter's essay on Stein, as well as the timing of the publication of it after Gertrude Stein died, provoked controversy. Porter took pains to point out that she had been working on her criticism of Stein long before she died.

In a letter to Donald Sutherland, Porter wrote, ". . . the piece about Gertrude Stein was meant to be a personal portrait--a self-portrait in fact, gathered feature by feature from her own two books of autobiographical writings, and it was an attempt to explain by implication why I thought her no artist: she was never able to get out of her own narcissistic preoccupation with herself, that terrible binding, crippling love of the self-lover for his own reflection in the mirror." (Collected Essays 282).

These harsh criticisms are only part of Porter's views of her contemporaries. There are many gentle, positive, encouraging statements in her commentaries. Of Eudora Welty, for example, Katherine Anne Porter had an extremely high opinion. Porter and Welty met in Louisiana and became friends. They attended the same conferences and workshops from time to time and stayed in touch over the years (although Porter was disturbed that Welty sent no greeting on an occasion during a hospital stay). Porter considered Welty a protogee of sorts, and she wrote the introduction for Welty's first collection of short stories. Porter praised the quality of truth in Welty's mind and work:

> There is an ancient system of ethics, an unanswerable, indispensable moral law, on which she is grounded fully, and this, it would seem to me, is ample domain enough; these laws have never been the peculiar property of any party or creed or nation, they relate to that true and human world of which the artist is a living part." (Collected Essays 287)

Another Southern woman writer also elicited praise from Porter. Of Flannery O'Connor, whom she knew personally, Porter wrote,

> She came up among us like a presence, a carrier of a gift not to be disputed but welcomed. She lived among us like a presence and went away early, leaving her harvest perhaps not yet all together gathered, though, like so many geniuses who have small time in this world, I think she had her warning and accepted it and did her work even if we all would like to have had her stay on forever and do more. . . . I loved and valued her dearly, her work and her strange unworldly radiance of spirit in a human being so intelligent and undeceived by the appearance of things." (Collected Essays 295-297)

Porter not only encouraged the younger women writers among her contemporaries, she also recognized the enduring value of the contributions of Virginia Woolf in both fiction and criticism. Listing Woolf as one of the great writers of modern literature, Porter wrote in a 1950 essay :

> Virginia Woolf was a great artist, one of the glories of our time, and she never published a line that was not worth reading. The least of her novels would have made the reputation of a lesser writer, the least of her critical writings compare more than favorably with the best criticism of the past half-century. In a long, sad period of fear, a world broken by wars, in which the artists have in the most lamentable way been the children of their time, knees knocking, teeth chattering, looking for personal salvation in the midst of world calamity, there appeared this artist, Virginia Woolf. . . . She lived in the naturalness of her vocation. The world of the arts was her native territory; she ranged freely under her own sky, speaking her mother tongue fearlessly. She was at home in that place as much as anyone ever was.

Although Porter praised and encouraged women writers, she did not consider herself a feminist. Indeed, she quite firmly attempted to distance herself from the feminist movement. In a letter of July 4, 1953, to her friend Donald Sutherland, Porter reflects an inability to consider women in many lines of work.

> I do think a woman admiral could easily be ridiculous, and certain forms of athletics are very unbecoming to women, and I know for certain that Nature or Something meant for Aristotle to be a man and Joan of Arc a woman. (No matter if she did straddle a horse and wave a sword, hers was a most womanly career and purpose. Her feelings are completely feminine.) St. Thomas was rightly a man, and St. Theresa of Avila a woman: they were both tremendous geniuses and there is no question of rivalry or inequality. They don't get in each other's way at all. If a woman bullfighter turned out, however, to be as good as Joselito or Sanchez Mejias, I should still think she was absurd and badly out of place (Collected Essays 283).

In an interview published in the Baltimore Sun on March 25, 1970, Katherine Anne Porter was asked "if she was ready to join the Women's Liberation Movement . . . she laughed uproariously.

"Certainly not . . .I don't agree with them. I told them, 'I will not sit down with you and hear you tell me men have abused you.' Any man who ever did wrong to me got back better than he gave. And I don't care about my rights. Rights never did me any good. I want my privileges. (I haven't always gotten those.)

There is something lacking there. I just can't read any more about them. I don't care what they do just so they don't do it in the streets and scare the horses.

I felt that way, too, about Betty Friedan's book when it was sent me to read. While I was going through it, I thought, Oh, Betty, why don't you go mix a good cocktail for your husband and yourself and forget about this business."

(Givner, Conversations 155-156)

These anti-feminist sentiments expressed by Porter seem inconsistent with her actions and struggles during a long, arduous literary career. Her public rejection of the movement to assure women's rights and her deprecating remarks about the efforts of Betty Friedan and others seem a contradiction for a woman whose experiences had surely taught her the realities of inequities. Still these attitudes reflect another of the enigmas of Katherine Anne Porter, a woman who on the personal level aided the careers of other women, a woman whose fierce independence carried her through the rugged ups and downs of eighty years of this century, an artist whose works show the roles of women to be meaningful, even heroic. Porter's commentaries on her contemporaries provide us a mirror of her times and a picture of her mind.